

# Changing <sup>the</sup> Narrative

How to Push Back Against  
Harmful Media Narratives About  
Youth of Color

September 2017



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## Introduction & Purpose

NJJN members are dedicated to pursuing anti-racist legislative and regulatory policies in the youth justice system.

The media plays a large role in influencing the public discourse on critical topics like race, youth justice, mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline.

In cities across the country we've seen regressive youth justice and education policy shifts driven in part due to media narratives criminalizing Black and Brown youth. In order to advance positive outcomes for youth, and ensure youth of color are not targeted by our education justice system, communities, organizers and advocates must counter these narratives by building relationships with the media and ensuring accurate reporting.

In this vein, this toolkit aims to provide advocates guidance on how to identify harmful media narratives, build relationships with media professionals, and hold the media accountable for its reporting.

## Identifying Criminalizing Media Coverage of Youth of Color

We encourage you to consistently [monitor](#) media outlets and analyze the following criteria to identify problematic narratives. Below are criteria for analyzing media coverage.

### Criteria for Analyzing Media Coverage

**Language Choice** - Watch out for dehumanizing language that describes youth of color as [thugs](#) or menaces. Pay particular attention to keywords like: ‘ex-con,’ ‘felon,’ or ‘militant,’ and language around undocumented youth. Phrases like [“illegal immigrant”](#) or “illegal alien” cement the idea that a person’s very existence is criminal and that undocumented youth should be entitled to fewer rights and privileges.

**Language Posture** - The media can frequently shift blame from the aggressor to the victim, especially when the victim is a student or youth of color. Passive phrases like “get yourself killed” or “got themselves killed” justify the use of excessive force and absolve the aggressor of responsibility, especially when the aggressor is a police officer. Encourage journalists to use active language like “x person shot y youth” to ensure Black and Brown youth are not criminalized in media coverage.

**Background Descriptions** - Including certain details about a young person’s background can be criminalizing. Are previous [arrests](#) or convictions included in the description of youth victims? Are descriptions around a student’s disciplinary record included? These background details dehumanize youth of color and frequently define victims by their mistakes, rather than children. Be on the lookout for irrelevant details like socio-economic status (ex: on welfare/food stamps/Section 8). These details are usually irrelevant to the story and reinforce the narrative of the inevitability of criminal behavior among poor people.

#### *Example*

In public discussions, Black children often morph into potentially menacing adults after they’ve been victimized, while white mass shooters are portrayed as children, even if they’re well into their 20s. Ex: Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy shot by police in Cleveland while playing with a toy gun, was characterized as a “young man.” But James Holmes, who was 25 when he shot dozens at an Aurora, Colo., movie theater, was frequently defined by his youth in media profiles, which described him as “a normal kid,” a “typical American kid” and “a smart kid.”

- Excerpt from Anthea Butler’s piece in the Washington Post

**Image Sourcing** - Images are often a key component of criminalizing coverage of youth of color. Look out for news segment or articles that include mug shots rather than a yearbook or family photo. Images are powerful and mug shots inherently imply adulthood and criminality. White youth like Brock Turner, the infamous Stanford University student convicted of rape, are more likely to have [flattering photos](#) included in media coverage, even when convicted of heinous crimes.

## Responding to Criminalizing Coverage of Youth of Color

As you monitor media in your state, undoubtedly coverage criminalizing youth of color will arise requiring advocates to hold reporters, editors and outlets accountable. Below you will find examples to help guide your outreach.

**1. Email Reporters and Editors** - Email reporters and editors when you come across coverage that criminalizes youth of color.



### Sample Email

Subject: Re: Racist Maryland man who fatally stabbed Black New Yorker admits his intent to kill African-American men

Rocco and Aidan,

Jeralyn Cave here with Advancement Project, a national multi-racial civil rights organization that does work around policing and the school-to-prison pipeline. We are deeply disappointed with your reporting on the murder of Caughman and the way in which you criminalized a Black murder victim. Below I have posted your descriptions of the murderer and self-proclaimed white nationalist, James Jackson, and Caughman, an innocent Black resident completely undeserving of the atrocious attack.

*Caughman lived in transitional housing on W. 36th St. that serves people with HIV/AIDS. Praxis Housing Initiatives holds a contract with the city. He has 11 prior arrests, including for marijuana, assault, resisting arrest and menacing.*

Why did your team choose to mention that the victim had 11 prior arrests? His arrest record is of no relevance to the fact that he was the victim of a hate crime. The description used is a reoccurring trend we frequently see in the media: the use of language and details that criminalize Black and Brown victims that in many ways seems to justify their death and reduce their humanity. Does it really matter if Caughman was transient or had previous arrests?

On the contrary, your depiction of the murderer seems to say the exact opposite and invoke even a form of compassion, as if maybe he was sick or insane. *James Harris Jackson, an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan and is a member of a documented hate group from Maryland, surrendered to cops just after midnight Tuesday, sources said.*

You seem to portray James as a pretty upstanding guy, other than the fact that he was a racist murderer and a member of a hate group. I would love to connect you with our staff to talk further in the future about how folks at the *Daily News* can be more conscious of the narrative they paint in describing Black and Brown victims of hate crimes. I can be reached at the number in my signature and via email.

**2. Call, Call, Call** - Editors write headlines; reporters don't. When responding to criminalizing coverage, the best person to engage is the person who has the power to correct and update an article or piece. This is of importance as an individual journalist or reporter may be a contributor to an outlet and not a staff writer/producer. Call the outlet and request to speak with the appropriate editor. Describe the problematic coverage and express your disappointment. Make sure to request a correction to the story during your conversation. You can gain more leverage by having multiple allies call the editor requesting a change in the criminalizing coverage.



**3. Be a Resource** - Media coverage is often impacted by tight deadlines and limited resources. Coverage that contains criminalizing language or problematic visuals can be the result. Be a resource by offering pictures, biographies and information about youth that provide a more complete picture of a young person's interests, extracurricular activities, passions and character.

**Amplify positive news. Send a note of thanks for a good story or for revisions to an inaccurate story. Share the piece across your social channels to boost traffic to the news organization's site and they will notice**

**4. Create Your Own Content** - If the narrative the media pushes is problematic, develop your own content. Write op-eds and send letters to the editor on the real youth justice story. Publish your blog posts online, send them out in your newsletters and post them on social media.

# Tips to Building Positive Media Relationships

Developing and maintaining positive media relationships will help you challenge problematic portrayals of youth of color. Incorporate the below media relations strategies to begin to building positive media relationships with journalists.

**1. Introduce yourself** and your organization's work. When reaching out for the first time to journalists, introduce yourself and your organization. Be clear about what kind of work you do and how you can be a resource in the future. Show them that you've read their work and tailor your message accordingly.

Send an intro email like the one below and invite the reporter to an in-person meeting (i.e. coffee). Schedule a phone conversation if they're unavailable to meet in person. During the conversation, learn about the journalist's reporting priorities, how they like to receive information and what topics they are exploring for future stories. Share your expertise, current work and upcoming projects.



## Sample Introductory Email

Hi Sherri,

Jane Doe here and I wanted to personally reach out and introduce myself. I am a member of [Insert organization], a statewide coalition dedicated to securing state, local and federal laws, policies and practices that are fair, equitable and developmentally appropriate for all children, youth and their families. I'd love to offer a variety of juvenile justice, education and civil rights experts including [Insert Name], our Executive Director, that might be of interest to you for future articles/features.

I would also love to connect you with [expert name and title] at [organization] if you are interested. Last week, a video captured a police officer assaulting Benjamin Franklin High School senior Brian Burney after he failed to show a pass to use the bathroom. The violent incident, which included Burney being punched in the face, prostrated in the school hallway and placed in a headlock, prompted strong condemnation from the student coalition. Burney and the student recording the incident are both PSU members.

I'd love to setup a meeting or call with you to talk shop on how we might be an asset and learn more about the projects you may have in the works. Please let me know your availability for the coming weeks. I look forward to meeting you soon.

[Insert your signature]

**2. Create a Media Hot List** - Create a list of go-to media members who report on your issues. This list should include journalists, editors, bloggers and TV/radio producers. Keep this list up to date, easily accessible and make sure this group gets relevant press releases, media advisories and event announcements from your organization.

**3. Connect on Social Media** - Social media offers great accessibility to journalists. Twitter and other social media platforms are used widely by journalists so you should connect with them online. Interact with reporters -- like, share and comment on their work. Remember to keep it casual -- it is social media after all.

**4. Act as a resource** - Offer research, experts or impacted sources who are willing to be interviewed. Have fact sheets and one-pagers ready for journalists writing stories about your issues. Send relevant quotes and pictures with your information.

**5. Stay in touch** - Send your new research to crime reporters and direct them to your newsroom or hub for the latest juvenile justice information. Also send relevant information to reporters that may not always come directly from you, but may be helpful to the reporter in writing stories or finding new leads. This is an important in relationship media building and showing you are here to help.

## Social Media Strategies for Changing the Media Narrative

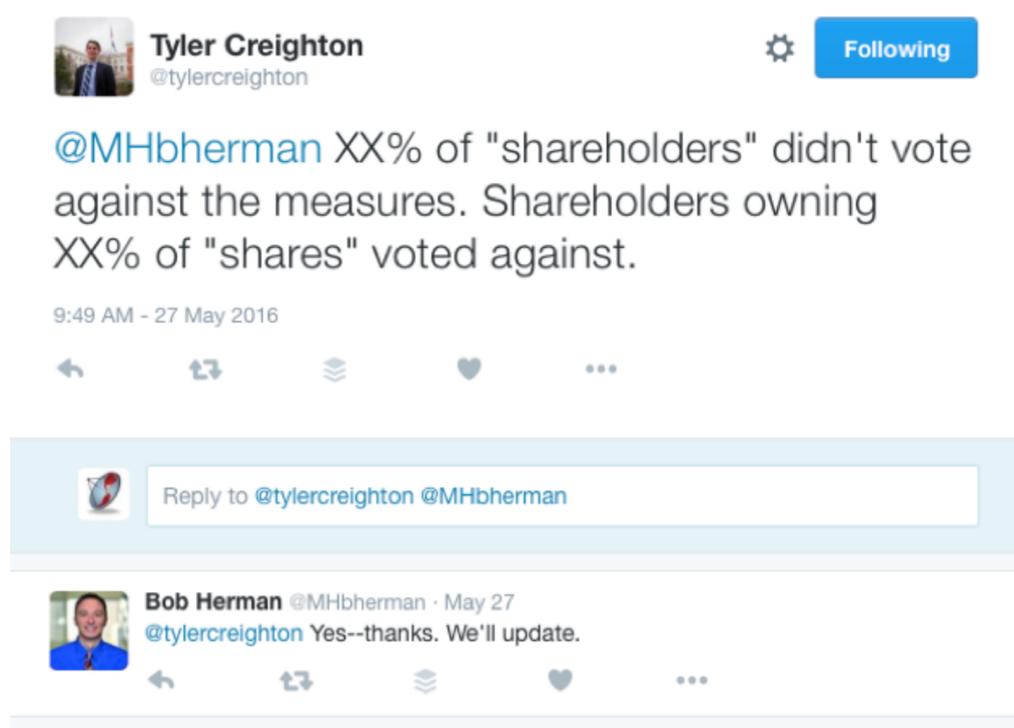
Social media is the new town square -- use this effective tool to connect with key journalists, get your message out to the masses and send targeted messages to an individual or organization. The purpose of this strategy sheet is to equip you with tactics for changing the media narrative using your social media channels.

**1. Go to social media with a game plan** - What do you want to accomplish? How will you accomplish it? What will be your goals? Maybe you want a certain number of users to tweet \*politely\* at a news outlet or journalist about a problematic story.

**2. Follow the reporters on social media** - See what journalist from your Media Hot List are tweeting about, what they cover and how/if they respond to readers on social media.

**3. Treat your Twitter bio like an elevator pitch** - Establish authority by writing a strong Twitter bio that conveys your expertise.

**4. Be polite** - No one likes being called out. If you do decide to do so on Twitter, consider having it come from a personal account instead of your organization's account so it feels more authentic. On Twitter, make sure their Twitter handle is first in your tweet and that the first character of your tweet is the @-symbol. Twitter treats this as a reply and only shows this content to the people who follow both you and the reporter, which is likely just a handful of people. **Tip: Have coworkers read your tweet before and ask them to put themselves in the shoes of the journalists to see if your response is appropriate and will be well received.**



**Don't just say: "this is inaccurate."  
Provide the reporter with the correct information**

**5. Enlist the help of others** - You have people in your network who care about children being criminalized and would go to bat for youth of color. Equip your local ambassadors with messaging, tweets and research that challenges harmful media narratives.

## Additional Resources

Explore the following resources for more information on changing the media narrative on youth of color, engaging the media and countering harmful coverage.

### **Experts Discuss The Ways Media Criminalize Youth Of Color**

A [panel discussion](#) with Advancement Project, Media Matters, Blackbird and *The Root* explores how the media contribute to and perpetuate harmful narratives about youth of color.

### **Best Practices for Journalists Reporting on Police Killings of Black and Brown People**

This [document](#) provides journalists and producers with guidance on how to best cover Black and Brown people, especially when they are killed by police.

### **Pitching Stories to Reporters**

Use NJJN's helpful [document](#) for guidance, tips and best practices on pitching reporters.

### **Campaign for Youth Justice Media Guide**

This comprehensive [guide](#), courtesy of the Campaign for Youth Justice, provides guidance on media engagement and sample media materials you can use and remix.

### **Social Justice Phrase Guide**

The Social Justice Phrase [Guide](#) developed by Advancement Project and the Opportunity Agenda is a go-to tool to craft inclusive messages across media platforms and across communities.



*Advancement Project is a multi-racial civil rights organization. Founded by a team of veteran civil rights lawyers in 1999, Advancement Project was created to develop and inspire community-based solutions based on the same high quality legal analysis and public education campaigns that produced the landmark civil rights victories of earlier eras.*



*The National Juvenile Justice Network is composed of coalitions, organizations and alumni of the Youth Justice Leadership Institute across 44 states and the District of Columbia, all of whom advocate for a fairer justice system for children and teens. For more information, visit [www.njjn.org](http://www.njjn.org)*

**For more information, contact Advancement Project at [jcave@advancementproject.org](mailto:jcave@advancementproject.org) or the National Juvenile Justice Network at [info@njjn.org](mailto:info@njjn.org).**